

Continuity and change in national parties' strategies of adaptation to European integration

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Abstract

How have national parties adapted their strategies of competition and behaviour to use, handle, and manage the European issue in domestic political competition? This article outlines the principal elements of continuity and change in the ways national party organisations have strategically adapted to the increasing significance of European integration in West European party systems over the last twenty years. It contests the arguments of a gradual europeanisation and rising progress of euroscepticism. It shows that the likelihood of politicisation over European matters occurring has been very dependent on the arena and the context considered. Few changes have occurred regarding the consensual and relatively positive treatment of the European Union (EU) in national newspapers, the very limited saliency of EU-related debates in national electoral campaigns and the tendency of mainstream parties to converge rather than diverge on the ways they frame the EU. Conflicts over EU matters are not typical, nor are they inherently on the increase: they remain the exception rather than the rule.

Introduction

How have national parties adapted their strategies of competition and behaviour to use, handle, and manage the European issue in domestic political competition? How have different parties within distinct political systems adapted their behaviour under the influence of European integration over time? In response to these research questions, this article provides a critical review of the existing studies and of their arguments in the contemporary political science literature. Building on a comprehensive review of the existing findings, it attempts to outline the key elements of continuity and change in the ways national party organisations have strategically adapted to the increasing significance of European integration in West European party systems over the last twenty years. This comparative and longitudinal outlook enables us to engage in a broader theoretical debate and it paves the way to future investigations.

The article is structured into three complementary sections that discuss the findings related to the three main dimensions of studies in the literature: while the first sec-

tion reflects upon the strategies of political communication of national parties over EU matters; the second reassesses the dilemmas they have faced in EU referendums, their main strategies for managing intra-party factionalism as well as their evolving behaviour in response to the consolidation of the European electoral arena. The final section introduces a broader normative debate on the effects of these strategies of politicisation and depoliticisation of EU matters, outlining the centrality of a twofold paradox of "distance" and "defiance".

The strategies of communication over Europe of domestic party organisations: The stability of the marginalisation and the nationalisation of the EU

The literature dealing with political communication on EU matters at the national level is dominated by what could be conceptualised as the "europeanisation argument", that is to say, the broad idea that the visibility of

European affairs has gradually increased over the last fifteen or twenty years, while EU-related issues would have witnessed more and more convergent frames across distinct EU member states through transnationalisation trends. It is spoken here of a “europeanisation argument” because it introduces the notions of gradual and convergent processes that would have increasingly fostered the representation of European actors (vertical europeanisation), and of other actors from distinct EU member states (horizontal europeanisation) in domestic political debates. European actors or members of EU institutions would tend to increasingly participate in EU-related debates at the national level. It is said that these debates would witness increasingly similar frames of reference and a growing interconnectedness across EU countries. However, although the visibility of European affairs has, at times, increased at the national level - under certain political conjunctures which have fostered more intense debates - generally, EU matters have nevertheless remained relatively marginal in domestic politics. While this article would agree that convergent frames have sometimes emerged, in contrast, under routine circumstances as well as in general election campaigns, it is the stability of distinct “nationally-grounded” ways of framing the EU that has prevailed, while transnationalisation trends have remained marginal.

The stable marginalisation and low visibility of European affairs

The idea that the visibility of EU affairs has increased over time in domestic politics over the past twenty years is commonplace in the literature (Van de Steeg 2002: 499-519; Koopmans 2007: 183-210). From an empirical point of view, it has led several authors to take for granted the existence of a European public sphere, or to “look for” evidence that confirms its gradual emergence. For example, on the basis of the development of the symbols of the EU, such as the Euro, and the general positive support for EU membership by the populations of the distinct EU member states, Michael Bruter argues that a “mass European identity” would progressively have emerged (Bruter 2005: 2). However, a clear normative bias has prevailed. First, as a consequence of the fact that the theoretical and conceptual reflections have generally dominated the empirical investigations. Second, most political scientists have also preferred a “top-down” vision of what a European public sphere

would entail, rather than developing a bottom-up approach. Such alternative perspective would have started with empirical and inductive observations, to later argue, on the basis of concrete evidence, whether a process of “europeanisation” of domestic public spheres could in fact be observed. As Sophie Duchesne has rightly argued: “can we consider that an ‘imaginary European’ exists nowadays: controversial, variable from one country to another, and sufficiently constructed and present to exercise an influence upon the ways Europeans negotiate and act in relation to one another, and in relation to the rest of the world? It demands to be demonstrated” (Duchesne 2010: 7-16). The idea of a “gradual europeanisation of public spheres” is in fact contradicted by the lack of longitudinal perspectives, that are, undoubtedly, crucial to assess whether something has changed or not. These limits have been attested compellingly by Risse, who strongly defends this “europeanisation” thesis, even though he recognises that “the picture for the pre-1995 period remains unclear” (Risse 2010: 127-128).

This lack of a longitudinal perspective also appeared in the study of Hans-Jörg Trenz who argued, on the basis of the study of eleven daily newspapers from six EU member states, that one third of all political news contained references to EU issues (Trenz 2004: 291-319). However, as he focused only on one single year (in 2000), his findings might only represent a specific conjuncture. Elsewhere, he recognised the dilemma between of a “normative overstretch” on the one hand, and “empirical disenchantment” on the other hand (Trenz 2008). The conclusion that EU actors themselves are more visible when the specific issue of EU integration is framed, or that the more competences the EU presents in a given issue arena, the more EU actors are referred to in the media, is not especially unsurprising. (Koopmans 2007: 183-210). A longitudinal perspective is not only necessary, but the increasing visibility (or not) of EU affairs also needs to be considered on the basis of the degree to which national actors themselves, and not only European actors, have framed (or not) the EU to a greater extent. Wessler and his coauthors found that the articles mentioning EU actors have steadily increased between 1982 and 2003, but they also pointed out that these have remained relatively marginal by comparison to national institutions and actors (Wessler et al. 2008: 41).

Yet, if a common pattern can be delineated regarding the nature of EU-related debates at the national level, it can be argued that it is the continuously lim-

ited visibility of EU institutions and actors that needs to be emphasised. National party organisations have not framed EU issues to a greater extent in domestic electoral campaigns over the last fifteen years. The extent to which EU-related issues might potentially constitute a matter of partisan debates in domestic campaigns in fact remains strongly influenced by contextual factors, and especially by their temporal proximity to EU “grand bargains” and Treaty negotiations. Indeed, it can be said that the closer domestic elections occur to EU Treaty ratifications and the more polarised mainstream parties are on EU matters, the more EU-related debates are likely to be salient in national electoral campaigns.

In some ways, there is nothing new in the fact that general elections are still, first and foremost, about national politics and that the saliency of EU issues in domestic campaigns remains very limited. However, the fact that we cannot say, on the basis of concrete empirical evidence, that nowadays there are more debates about Europe in national electoral campaigns than there were in the early 1990s, is far more surprising and presents important theoretical implications. Indeed, it is a clear indication that national elites have not contributed to foster a “cognitive” turn that might have attenuated the real and the imaginary boundaries that continue to seclude domestic political spaces and national citizens from the EU system of governance. Conversely, it would appear that whilst the “institutions” of the EU have evolved, the main domestic “interests” and nationally-oriented “ideas” of domestic elites have remained relatively unchanged, so that they have, arguably, become “trapped by their ideas” about Europe (Hassenteufel and Surel 2001: 8-24; Schmidt 2007a: 992-1009).

In fact, several other studies also question the thesis of a gradual europeanisation of domestic partisan debates. A recent study using time series data analysis from 1951 to 1995 has shown that EU issues mattered very little in German quality newspapers (Van de Steeg 2005: 145-146). If the coverage of the EU has remained fairly limited in a traditionally pro-EU country, the potential for an increasing visibility of the EU in other countries seems even more remote. Another investigation of the coverage of five EC/EU summits between 1969 and 1991 in German, French and British newspapers has suggested the importance of “fall and rise”, that is, significant fluctuations in the treatment of the EU: for example, while the 1991 Maastricht summit received much attention, other posterior ratifications such as the debates about the Treaty of Amsterdam obtained no such visibility (Meyer 2008: 327-340). Meyer suggests that even though EC/

EU summits are the “masterpieces” of EU politics and foster an increased public visibility of the EU, the “European actuality” still remains marginal in terms of the news overall. Another study has also demonstrated that “European affairs are not covered routinely”, but tend to be given a “fragmented treatment linked with the important events of the European institutional actuality” (Le Torrec and Garcia 2003: 122). Overall, while scholars disagree about whether the visibility of the EU and European affairs has increased over time, they nevertheless converge, explicitly or implicitly, on the idea that domestic actors and nationally-oriented claims still dominate importantly. Independently of the normative debate related with the actual existence (or not) of a European public sphere, most authors do agree that ‘Europe’ and ‘European integration’ generally remain secondary issues for domestic political parties as compared with national matters.

Risse (2010: 118) rightly asserts that “the more European and EU issues are reported by comparison to national or local issues, the more we could claim a europeanisation of public spheres”. However, it is rather the continuous marginalisation of EU institutions and actors that has prevailed in domestic politics. The treatment of EU affairs continues to fluctuate between visible conjunctures surrounding the EU’s ‘great bargains’ and a relative invisibility under routine periods. Top-down vertical claims, characterised by demands from supranational actors on domestic actors and institutions, have remained relatively marginal over the last fifteen years in domestic political spaces. The public communication of EU institutions and actors has continuously been poorly presented in domestic public spheres, demonstrating little change in that respect, so that it has remained a “surrealist communication” characterised by structural weaknesses and limits (Dacheux 1994: 159-166).

It is nonetheless true that national parties have adapted in a certain way to the development of EU integration, to the extent that they have directed a greater proportion of their claims towards (and generally against) the EU level, and slightly incorporated the “European dimension” into their national political discourses. These trends are interesting in themselves given that they show that parties have not been immune to the process of EU integration. Yet, if the level of analysis is displaced to consider the broader effects of these dynamics of adaptation to the more general ways through which parties compete, it can be said that apart from during specific and temporarily limited conjunctures, EU issues have continuously remained marginalised. Parties have not

remained completely “frozen” in their response to the development of EU integration, yet it cannot be stated that important changes have occurred. Rather, party organisations have developed strategies of “conservative modernisation”, understood as limited adaptations and strategic uses of Europe, that have nonetheless led them to maintain their broad traditional patterns of behaviour (Badie 1992: 48-57; Jacquot and Woll 2004). Therefore, it seems clear that contrary to the important speculations that dominate the literature, nothing can tell us that a greater “europeanisation” of domestic politics has occurred - or necessarily will occur in the future. In fact this prospect seems even more unlikely given the limits of most of the investigations in this field of research, which mainly consider national debates over Europe through the lens of domestic newspapers (Erbe 2005: 75-92; Adam 2007: 409-433). Indeed, it is well-known that, in practice, most people receive their news about the EU from television and tabloids, rather than from radios and quality newspapers (Blumler 1983). De Vreese et al. have, for instance, emphasised that the television coverage of the EU in the weeks prior to the 1999 and to the 2004 EU elections, was very marginal in all EU member states (De Vreese et al. 2006: 477-504). Pfetsch et al. have shown that the tabloids in Germany, Spain and the Netherlands generally comment on the EU even less than quality newspapers, while Peter and De Vreese have concluded that the EU remains almost entirely absent from television coverage, stating that “television has not left the nation-state” (Pfetsch 2008: 474; Peter and De Vreese 2004: 18). Hence, by focusing on quality newspapers rather than on tabloids, TV or radios coverage, most investigations tend to exaggerate the degree to which national public spheres might be europeanised (De Vreese and Boomgarden 2003: 361-381).

This implies that the very limited, temporally confined and spatially secluded europeanisation of national political debates that can be observed under routine periods in domestic newspapers and electoral campaigns would be even more limited in practice. Even in quality newspapers, which are arguably read by a limited and rather “elitist” public, the absence of europeanised debates generally predominates. Risse himself recognises that “if EU affairs are not reported at all, we do not need to worry about a European public sphere any further” (Risse 2010: 116). Agreeing that a European public sphere could theoretically emerge “through the process by which people debate controversial issues in public”, this study nevertheless questions whether this process

has taken place up in the EU to date (Risse 2010: 111). The visibility of EU institutions and actors, as well as the general treatment of European affairs is still relatively marginal in domestic public spheres, apart from during specific and limited conjunctures. If one considers the evolutions at stake from a broad longitudinal perspective, it appears that it is the nationalisation of the EU and the bottom-up transposition of the nationally-based visions of domestic actors towards Europe that have prevailed, and that continue to do so.

1.2. *The myth of transnational European debates*

The idea that the discussion of EU-related issues would have been characterised by increasingly convergent frames and transnational exchanges across EU member states is also widespread among those who claim an emerging “European identity” (Robyn 2005; Checkel 2009: 1-25). Fossum and Schlesinger speak, for instance, of a European-wide “communicative space in the making” (Fossum and Schlesinger 2007: 12). Ulrike Liebert also argues that “transnational communication has given foreign actors a direct voice and has led them to incorporate foreign arguments, positive as well as negative, into national public discourses” (Liebert 2007: 254). On the basis of the study of four EU-wide controversies (the Haider debate, the ratification of the EU Constitution, the debates over enlargement and on EU foreign and security policies), Risse argues that shared frames of reference appeared across the distinct EU member states. He concludes that “a community of communication in the making” can be observed through the growing interconnectedness between EU-related debates in distinct countries (Risse 2010: 139-157). Barbara Berkel also argued that a tendency that could be characterised by a greater “parallelism” emerged in the news and commentary on the Haider conflict in Austrian, British, German and French newspapers (Berkel 2006: 85-104). However, to paraphrase Andy Smith, it seems that many scholars have developed an “aerial view” of what a public sphere is, leading them to mix the potential emergence of a European public sphere (that exists) with its actual existence (that does not yet exist) (Smith 1999: 169-180). Hence, while this study does not deny that transnational political debates on EU matters have sometimes occurred, it argues that they have remained sporadic and fairly limited to specific conjunctures and controversies. Risse suggests that the extent of transna-

tional patterns of communication is attested by the degree to which “national media observe political debates and conflicts in fellow European countries” (Risse 2010: 118). Overall, there is nevertheless little evidence of this type of “horizontal europeanisation” linked with transnational references to other EU member states. In other words, it seems reductive to focus on limited conjunctures only to later argue that transnational exchanges over EU matters have progressed. Instead, if one takes a broader longitudinal outlook, it appears that transnational communication over EU matters constitutes a convenient myth that, nonetheless, remains marginal and sporadic. Several recent investigations have questioned the reality of transnational patterns of communication over European issues, as well as the idea of a “gradual” emergence of transnational communicative exchanges (Baisnée 2007: 493-303; Mesnil 2000: 58-75). It could even be said that this premise reproduces the same dilemma that characterises the neo-functional theory, as it suggests the existence of a process that would progress inherently (Haas 1958).

Other authors have shown that, to date, it is difficult to speak of a greater “transnationalisation” of the debates over Europe across EU member states. Focusing on Austrian, Danish, French, German and British newspapers, Wessler and his coauthors find, for instance, that “Europe” became the object of identification in only 5 percent of the articles they studied, concluding that a “distinctly European discourse involving speakers from EU institutions and from other European countries only take place in the small number of articles which actually focus on EU policymaking” (Wessler et al. 2008: 46-51). While he recognises that “the transnationalisation of discourses and its interdiscursivity” are mostly confined to EU actors and national governments, Risse nevertheless concludes that a “transnational and European-wide” public sphere would be in the making (Risse 2010: 170). However, in my view, the fact that the degree of “horizontal” patterns of communication across EU member states has remained marginal and limited to specific conjunctures constitutes clear evidence of a lack of europeanisation and transnationalisation.

1.3. The continuous nationalisation of European affairs

A third point that importantly contradicts the idea of a “gradual europeanisation” of domestic political debates is the centrality of the nationalisation of EU affairs. In-

deed, it can be said that the debates over European integration have remained significantly nationalised in Western Europe, a pattern that has not really changed over the last twenty years. Another investigation has in fact concluded that two thirds of all actors mentioned in EU-related claims in British newspapers were national, and that only 15 percent were European (Statham and Geddes 2006: 248-269). It shows the continuous importance of nationalised debates, and of the transposition at the EU level of context-specific and nationally-based visions of the EU (Diez Medrano 2003). The EU continues to be introduced into national political debates as an addressee of proposals and critiques, rather than EU actors themselves playing an “active” role by making demands. Domestic elites are also more commonly inclined to frame “Europe” depending on their national views and projects on the EU, or to use the EU level as a “blame-shifting” reference point, rather than to present and explain EU-related developments to their domestic publics (Schmidt 2007b: 270).

Indeed, studying the media reporting on Eastern enlargement in five European countries during the 1990s, Van de Steeg illustrates that references to a national “we” as the predominant focus for investigations have been used more frequently than references to a European “we” (Van de Steeg 2005: 125-129). On the basis of the analysis of editorials in German, Spanish and British newspapers between 1946 and 1997, Diez Medrano illustrated that the German and Spanish treatment of the EU was more positive than in Great-Britain, while these patterns have been rather stable over time, and have not been affected by the evolutions of the relationships that the respective countries have had with the EU (Diez Medrano 2003: 116-153). Oberhuber and his coauthors have only found convergent frames on constitutional issues, leading them to conclude that “within each country a different EU seems to be represented and different issues are debated” (Oberhuber et al. 2005: 263). That is why, contrary to Risse who argued that shared “liberal” and “nationalist” frames of reference over Europe can be distinguished across countries, this study argues that national differences still predominantly matter in the ways parties apprehend EU integration.

Indeed, even though this study agrees that broad similar “master frames” can sometimes be delineated across countries, as Isabelle Guinaudeau and Simon Persico have demonstrated for party programmes, it nonetheless argues that these frames are not always salient in the same ways, while, in addition, they do not follow the

same hierarchies across countries, which consequently leads them to work in quite different ways (Guinaudeau and Persico 2011: 82-105). Thus, from the viewpoint of the themes and general judgments associated with EU integration, differences across countries arguably still prevail over similarities. Even though this article agrees that distinct “liberal” and “nationalist” visions of the EU can be delineated in each EU member states, what they imply strongly differs depending on the context considered, so that it seems misleading to argue on that basis that we would witness a greater convergence of europeanised frames. The idea of a “liberal” Europe is, for example, associated with completely different notions in Great-Britain and France: in the former, it implies a “modernisation” of the EU over an unnecessary political union, and it is positively related with a common market favoured by sovereign states; by contrast, in the latter it is negatively perceived as “putting to death” the EU, as a triumph of deregulation and economics over integration and politics. Even though the theme is similar, it is framed in completely different ways on each side of the Channel, so that the convergence around thematic issues should not so easily taken for granted. On that point, it has been recently demonstrated that the question of Turkish membership to the EU has been framed by domestic party actors in French, Belgian, and British newspapers between 2004 and 2006 on the basis of three dominant “master frames”: enlargement, cultural identity and the Islamic religion. Yet, what is interesting here for our argument on the continuous nationalisation of EU affairs, is that while these three themes always dominate the treatment of Turkish membership in the three different countries, they are nevertheless associated with completely distinct types of arguments (Petithomme 2010: 60-70). Indeed, the enlargement of the EU is positively perceived by the British press so that the admission of Turkey, a “periphery at the image of Great-Britain”, is globally conceived as a factor of modernisation of the image of the EU, while it would help to contradict the representation of a “Christian Europe” and the picture of a “clash of civilisations” with the rest of the world (Petithomme 2010: 78). In France, the enlargement to include Turkey is strongly criticised as a symbol of the “dilution of the political character of the EU”, so that political actors are generally opposed to this “in principle”. In Belgium, the dominant frames are more moderately opposed to Turkish membership, to the extent that they remain conditional on the deepening of the political character of the EU: an enlargement to Turkey could potentially be accepted, but only if the

EU would first and foremost progress more decisively towards a federal political union (Petithomme 2010: 71-77).

The same could be said about the themes of cultural identity and Islamic religion that dominate the framing of Turkish membership, but operates in different directions in the three countries: such themes are associated with a type of “defiance” against Turkey in France, with “suspicion” and conditional arguments in Belgium, and with “hope” for better inter-cultural relationships in the British press. The way Turkish membership to the EU is framed is also dependent upon internal controversies in France, on the broader debates on the “political” project of the EU in Belgium, and on the general relationships that the country has with the EU in Great-Britain (Petithomme 2010: 105-106). Clarifying these elements helps to illustrate the idea that even though similar “master frames” over Europe can sometimes be found across distinct EU member-states, they only emerge sporadically during controversial EU-related debates, whereas overall, the ways party actors apprehend the EU remain very dependent on the national variable. That is why, on the basis of a broad longitudinal outlook, the idea that “national differences in the use of frames recede into the background” can be questioned: thus, rather than a gradual “europeanisation” and “transnationalisation” of domestic public spheres, what seems to prevail is the continuous importance of “nationally-based European views” (Risse 2010: 119).

Conflict and polarisation over European matters: The prevalence of convergence and depoliticisation

Another major argument in the literature could be conceptualised as the “rising euroscepticism” thesis, that is to say, the idea that conflict and polarisation over EU matters would have progressed over the last twenty years. We would witness the end of the “permissive consensus” that led political elites to be “able to pursue their own policy interests because of public disinterest” (Carubba 2001: 141-158). Conflict over EU matters would increasingly follow Kantner’s issue cycles criteria, in the sense that “the same issues are discussed at the same time using the same criteria of relevance” (Kantner 2006: 501-523). “Debating Europe” would increasingly tackle the EU’s democratic deficit, as a first step

to democratising the EU (Trenz and Eder 2004: 5-25). While this study agrees that conflict and polarisation over EU matters have sometimes occurred, it argues that they have remained sporadic and contextual rather than inherently increasing. Radical parties have periodically managed to politicise Europe in certain political arenas, but they have failed to foster spill-over effects to restructure the broader patterns of political exchange. At times "Euroscepticism" has upsurged, but it has been actively contained by mainstream parties through the recurrent reaffirmation of consensual stances towards the EU. Three elements are thus considered: the prevalence of consensual elite discourses over Europe, the ways parties have "compartmentalised" intra-party divisions over Europe, and the twofold behaviour of mainstream and peripheral opposition parties.

2.1. *The prevalence of consensual elite discourses over Europe*

To begin with, it has been said that conflict and polarisation over EU matters have progressed over the last fifteen years, given that the same European themes would have become increasingly controversial and debated at the same time across the distinct domestic public spheres of EU member states. Van de Steeg argued for instance that an almost identical issue cycle occurred across Europe during the Haider debate (Van de Steeg 2006: 609-634). Investigating the treatment of the discussions on the "Future of Europe" in six EU countries, Trenz concluded that the controversies followed similar highs and lows (Trenz 2007: 93-95). In a comparative study of the debates on EU enlargement and on the EU constitutional project in the German and French quality press, Adam nonetheless showed that only the treatment of constitutional issues witnessed similar cycles between 2000 and 2002 (Adam 2008: 101-102). In fact, the same European themes only seem to be debated at the same time when they relate to constitutional issues or to the "great debates" of EU politics, so that over the long term, it is the fluctuating visibility of European politics - mirrored by the "highs" and "lows" of the European political agenda that has arguably prevailed (Hubé 2003: 69-87).

Indeed, evidences exist showing that conflicts over EU matters have sometimes occurred: for example, the referendums on the Maastricht Treaty and on the ratification of the ECT have been particularly conflicting in France, as well as the referendums on the first Nice Tre-

ty and the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland. On the basis of the case of Great-Britain - where few debates take place on European integration as Euroscepticism is shared across the party system - it could be said that the more or less important saliency of EU matters in domestic elections might be related more to the degree of polarisation between mainstream parties on the EU dimension, than to the dominance of negative frames towards the EU. In fact, it can be argued that the mobilisation of the "European dimension" by radical parties will have no effect on a broader restructuration of political cleavages as long as it does not divide mainstream parties (within or between them). One crucial condition is that mainstream parties need to be sufficiently divided and polarised on European integration, otherwise it would remain a "valence" and consensual issue that would not affect political competition (Budge et al. 2001: 1945-1998).

However, it has also been demonstrated in the literature that state actors and especially executive actors belonging to the incumbent party, have generally been better represented in national debates over EU issues, while MPs, extra-parliamentary actors and other civil society actors have remained rather secondary and poorly represented in domestic debates over Europe. Under routine periods, mainstream party families have also been generally more successful in assuring visibility for their claims over Europe, while peripheral parties, whether from the extreme-right or the extreme-left, have faced more significant difficulties in obtaining a greater visibility for their claims over Europe. Given that mainstream parties (with the exception of the British Conservatives) generally frame Europe in consensual and pro-European ways, pro-EU and office-seeking parties are consequently much more represented in EU-related debates than peripheral parties under routine periods. These elements reinforce the idea that EU integration remains an elite-dominated field, while asymmetries of powers, both between state and civil society actors on the one hand, and mainstream and peripheral parties on the other hand, still remain determinant. "European" debates at the national level are typically dominated by the arguments of one or two individuals from domestic executives and mainstream opposition leaders. In fact, it could even be said that they rarely take the form of "debates" understood as organised controversies, and inversely, that they frequently remain limited to consensual, "technical" and disincarnated statements.

That is why, contrary to the thesis of a "rising euroscepticism", it can be argued that, if one takes a longitudinal viewpoint, conflicts over EU matters rarely arise in prac-

tice: indeed, the general structure of political exchanges over EU matters under routine periods has generally been dominated by consensually positive claims over Europe in Western European party systems. Beyond routine periods, the same kind of pattern can arguably be delineated during national elections. The national variable has importantly contributed and continues to play a central role in differentiating the general tones of the debates on EU matters across countries. Domestic campaigns have not witnessed a shift towards more critiques on Europe over the last fifteen years, but have rather been characterised by an interesting stability in the types of tones associated with the EU depending on the country considered.

Therefore, in the light of these elements this article argues that EU integration constitutes a field where the consensus between mainstream party elites has remained particularly important, fostering a process that has effectively “encapsulated” the potential contestation of EU matters. Arnaud Mercier defined a public sphere as a “symbolic space where the discourses are exchanged, most of them contradictory, of the distinct social, religious, cultural, and political actors that compose a society” (Mercier 2003: 10). What is interesting here is that the application of the notion of a public sphere itself to the EU remains relatively questionable, to the extent that under routine periods, “Europe” is still almost exclusively framed by a very limited set of political actors, especially by the incumbent elites of the executive, which themselves generally share consensual and rather positive views over the EU. Thus, the politicisation of European matters has remained sporadic and temporarily limited to specific conjunctures more than inherently rising over time, while it has also been actively confined to certain electoral channels, especially through the use of EU referendums.

Internal conflicts within parties: encapsulating the politicisation of EU matters

The thesis of a “rising euroscepticism” may also be challenged from the viewpoint of the economy of intra-party relationships. Indeed, in the specific contexts of EU referendums and their aftermaths, the “European dimension” has sometimes contributed to question the lines over EU integration of certain types of parties through their greater likelihood of facing factionalism and dissent. Under certain circumstances, EU referen-

dums have contributed to bring about broader debates on EU integration within domestic parties. Here, two main elements need to be addressed. On the one hand, several studies have suggested that EU-related issues generally constitute an engine of dislocation of the militant link, in the sense that party leaderships tend to search the “blind conformity” of their rank-and-file members with the official line of their party on the EU. The elitist impositions of the lines of the parties on the EU arguably reinforce the already existing principle of delegation and the primacy of the injunctions towards consensus on EU matters that indirectly foster the “self-exclusion” of the party members that hold alternative ideas on the EU. On the other hand, while this factor of intra-party frustration can pave the way for an internal politicisation of EU matters, party leaderships have nevertheless developed active strategies to compartmentalise the emergence of such cleavages over Europe within their organisations.

Intra-party relationships and the continuation of the “permissive consensus”

From the viewpoint of the economy of intra-party relationships, it can be argued that rather than leading to an increasing politicisation, under routine periods, European integration has, conversely, frequently led to the maintenance of a type of “permissive consensus” between party elites on the one hand, that have actively controlled the definition of the stances of their organisations over Europe, and the rest of party members on the other hand (Lindberg and Scheingold 1963). More than the rise of an increasing contestation of the EU within domestic party organisations, this study argues that, overall, it is the “confinement” of EU-related debates to party elites that has prevailed. Debates over European matters have only rarely emerged, and when they have, only to a fairly limited extent, yet even in these cases, the legitimacy of party militants and of secondary party figures to defend their alternative views on the EU has been frequently questioned by the elites, illustrating clear distinctions between the preferences of the party leaderships and rank-and-file members. Indeed, it could be said that the “permissive consensus” is far from obsolete from the perspective of intra-party dynamics: for instance, the leaderships of several main-

stream opposition parties which have been significantly divided over European matters, have actively reinforced their autonomies by defining the lines of their parties over Europe in the aftermath of EU referendums. The convocation of internal debates or referendums on European matters, as well as the broad usages of “deliberative democracy”, while fostering internal deliberations, have nonetheless often been conceived by the elites as procedures of ratification of their own views through a careful planning of the contest agenda (Le Goff and Girard 2011). These procedures have often remained very instrumental for reinforcing the legitimacy of the party direction, or to solve a situation of internal crisis, rather than being used exclusively to decide (democratically) the party’s line on the EU. This kind of persistent “permissive consensus” and self-exclusion of party militants from potential discussions on EU matters can be explained by three factors related to the relative indifference of militants, as well as to the autonomy and pragmatism of party elites.

The first element – illustrating that under routine periods the indifference of militants has arguably prevailed over a manifest euroscepticism – is constituted, in analogy with ordinary citizens, by a twofold sense of “distance and complexity” that has dominated their relatively “impossible appropriation” of the EU (Duchesne and Van Ingelgom 2008: 143-164; Roger 2007: 37-53). Indeed, the perception of the technical nature of European issues and the weak publicity around EU regulations has arguably reinforced a process of self-exclusion of party militants from the potential discussions on EU issues, as a result of a perceived lack of competence. In a certain way, the objective and subjective distance from the European centres of power, perpetuates the reproduction of a certain indifference and “militant passivity” under routine periods, that tend to contradict the idea that EU issues have increasingly become matters of contention within party organisations: most of the time, party elites have (in practice) obtained a legitimacy, by default, in the choice of the European line of their parties through a persistent “permissive consensus”. Consequently, the autonomy that is granted to party elites in the definition of the European lines of their parties frequently constitutes a privileged way for party militants to “reduce the complexity” associated with the European integration process by trusting their directions with these issues, which then obtain an “autonomy by default” (Caprara 2007: 151-164).

The second element is the general interest of party elites in maintaining within the leaderships the discus-

sion and the definition of the lines over Europe of their respective organisations, in order to preserve their autonomies, to maintain the centrality of the principle of delegation and their important margins of manoeuvre in European decision-making processes. This has also been interestingly considered by Guillaume Duseigneur who illustrated, in a study of the internal deliberations over Europe of Swedish parties, that EU issues are not generally evoked during party congresses because party elites consider that those conjunctures have to constitute “moments of internal communion” and of ratification of the overall orientations of the party, rather than to provide conjunctures that would foster internal debates on issues that are judged to be “too technical” (Duseigneur 2011: 10). In practice, EU integration continues to be treated as an “external” issue and a matter of international relations, so that only a limited group of a “happy few” maintains its monopoly on how Europe should be perceived and framed (Duseigneur 2011: 10). This example clearly highlights how the leadership has sequenced its discourse to preserve its autonomy and to reaffirm its pro-EU line. It can finally be said that this type of “stratarchy” applies both to the relationships that party leaderships entertain with their rank-and-file members, and to the links between the actors involved in decision-making processes at the EU level, and the other domestic parties and party actors whose activities remain confined at the domestic level. Robert Ladrech has emphasised this process of reinforcement of the autonomy of domestic elites, especially for the parties that are implicated in government (Ladrech 2007: 216-218). This autonomy of the executive elites involved in EU decision-making processes is also indirectly reinforced by the relative “illegibility” of MEPs within their national political spaces, and by the weakness of domestic parliamentary controls over European matters (Costa 2009: 129-155; Grossman and Sauger 2007: 1117-1134).

Thirdly, contradicting the idea of a growing contestation of EU matters within parties, the willingness of party elites to compartmentalise the potential debates over Europe has appeared quite clearly through the importance of pragmatism in their behaviour. While this principle is broadly applicable to conventional political life, it can be said that it has particularly applied to the definition of the European lines of mainstream parties, in the sense that their stances have frequently remained intentionally and strategically vague to let party leaderships preserve important margins of autonomy. That is why most of the time, internal cohesion and consensus

are taken for granted by party leaderships and presented as symbols of “coherence” against other formations, even though in practice, it is generally the absence of debates that prevails. The argument of partisan consensus over EU matters is even further propagated, to the extent that it enables parties to present the politicisation of European issues as “irresponsible”. The fact that pro-Europeanism is often taken for granted by party leaderships illustrates well the persistence of a type of “permissive consensus” within parties. Therefore, it could be said that pragmatism and even a “mercenary approach towards integration”, as Holmes suggested, still constitute principles that guide the ways party elites apprehend EU issues (Holmes 2005: 12).

Party leaderships and the “compartmentalisation” of EU issues

On the other hand, contradicting the idea of a potential progression of internal conflicts over EU matters, party leaderships have arguably developed active strategies of temporal and spatial “compartmentalisation” of EU issues, to avoid or to try to confine the emergence of internal divisions on European matters. While enabling the parties to maintain their cohesion, such strategies have nonetheless directly contributed to the depoliticisation of EU-related debates within party organisations. Temporal compartmentalisation can be first observed through the choice by the leadership of the “European moments” within parties, understood as specific conjunctures when internal debates over Europe have been favoured to better contain their potential emergence in other more sensitive political conjunctures. It is clear that during conventional and routine political periods, European issues are in fact rarely debated within parties. Moreover, the precautionary choice of the electoral calendar by party leaders aims to keep EU issues “under quarantine” (Duseigneur 2005: 74-91).

The temporal compartmentalisation of EU issues also expresses itself through the sequencing of the discourse of mainstream parties on EU integration, notably through legitimising “euro-critique” voices during certain political conjunctures, while later on reaffirming the pro-EU consensus, which enables them to optimise the pursuit of contradictory political objectives. These strategies of sequencing of their discourses over Europe do not apply to radical parties given that they present a coherent oppositional stance: their attitudes of opposition towards the government generally con-

verge with their critiques of the modalities of EU integration. In practice, the strategies of temporal compartmentalisation privileged by the elites take the form of a recurrent motto: “let’s discuss this later” (Aylott 2002: 441-461). Thus, government parties have importantly sequenced their discourses on European integration over time, alternating between critical postures on the one hand, and the reaffirmation of the pro-European consensus on the other hand, depending on the precise “sequences” of the political debate considered.

Furthermore, the “compartmentalisation” of EU issues is also expressed through the intermediary of spatial logics, the more classical application of which remains the tendency to substitute, as far as possible, political competition on EU issues with national and even local questions. This “nationalisation” of the focus of political competition has been recurrently observed by several scholars (Hayward and Fallon 2011: 159-173). Pro-EU opposition parties have also often downplayed their engagements with EU referendum campaigns, choosing strategies of “silent mobilisation” and leaving the initiative to the government. Moreover, “permanent” campaigns focused on national issues have also constituted a powerful engine for the spatial compartmentalisation of EU issues, because the debates that are potentially associated with “Europe” in the context of EU elections and referendums are constantly pushed towards “other arenas” of political competition and “other moments” of political debates.

Overall, mainstream party leaderships have used relatively similar organisational, intra-personal, ideological, and competitive strategies to limit the potential spillover effects that the nascent intra-party debates over Europe could have engendered on their organisations. During referendum campaigns, these parties have tried to confine the debates to the direction, while recognising the rights of dissidents to exercise distinct “voices” in parallel with a demand of “loyalty” in order to confine them to a type of “cooperative factionalism” (Boucek 2009: 455-485). Nevertheless, the moral condemnation of dissidents has not generally engendered practical sanctions, given that party leaderships have preferred to present these divergences as symbols of “pluralism”. While the leaders of pro-European opposition parties necessarily have to compromise personally with the defense of the “Yes”, under certain circumstances they have also granted freedom of vote to the members and to the sympathisers of their parties. Finally, tendencies towards procrastination and towards the report of ideological debates on European matters have also been recurrent.

The twofold behaviour of opposition parties over Europe and the temporary displacement of traditional cleavages

In addition to the prevalence of consensual elite discourses over Europe and to the containment of internal conflicts within parties, another element that has clearly appeared in the literature is related with the twofold behaviour of opposition parties over the EU. Such issue is crucial as it enables us to explain why convergence and depoliticisation over EU integration have generally prevailed over conflict and polarisation. The twofold behaviour of opposition parties over the EU enables us to consider why the politicisation of EU matters has remained very contextual; less linked to the role of radical political entrepreneurs than it is usually recognised; and significantly dependent on the political arena considered.

First, the twofold behaviour of opposition parties over the EU has appeared in several studies through their clearly distinct stances whether under routine periods, in the context of national elections or in EU referendums: while mainstream opposition parties have almost always taken pro-EU positions, peripheral opposition parties have remained confined to anti-European positions. This has engendered important effects, in the sense that the "normal" structures of political competition have remained characterised by a pro-EU consensus shared within the mainstream, so that peripheral opposition parties have faced significant difficulties in mobilising the European cleavage and dividing their opponents on this issue. On that point, Hooghe and Marks argue that EU integration is no longer a "low salience issue for the general public" while its influence on party competition would have increased (Hooghe and Marks 2008: 7). They argue that the "closed shops of government leaders, interest groups and Commission officials have been bypassed as European issues have entered party competition" (Hooghe and Marks 2008: 9). It is true that with the ratifications over the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, EU integration has tended to become more contentious.

However, recent studies also suggest that the saliency of EU issues in general election campaigns has remained very low, and importantly influenced by contextual factors (Kriesi 2007: 83-108). Thus, the argument that EU issues have become more contested remains

questionable: one might indeed argue that, ultimately, EU matters still remain marginal. Hooghe and Marks (2008: 8-9) themselves recognise that "the level of public support in 2005 is not much lower than in 1985". In fact, it could be said that the respective positions of mainstream parties have not generally been sufficiently divided to allow for peripheral opposition parties to mobilise the European cleavage, so that in the end, the politicisation of EU issues has remained very dependent on contextual factors and limited to specific political conjunctures.

Second, the twofold behaviour of opposition parties also implies that paradoxically, the politicisation of EU matters seems to be less linked to the role of peripheral opposition parties than is usually suggested. Indeed, it is often said that peripheral opposition parties play a crucial role in mobilising the tension related to EU integration (Franklin and Van der Eijk 2007: 189-208). It is clear that under certain circumstances, political entrepreneurs have contested EU issues, but it could also be said that this has not always been the case, nor has contestation occurred equally in all political arenas. The role of political entrepreneurs belonging to radical parties in politicising EU integration has arguably been crucial in the context of certain EU referendums. Yet, if the thesis of a rising euroscepticism would hold, then we would expect that these parties would have also contributed to politicise EU integration in European as well as in national elections. However, EU elections have remained the paradise of "lost voters" over the last twenty years, and have been characterised by increasing abstention and popular withdrawal. National elections themselves have not globally witnessed more debates on EU affairs, to the extent that the important degrees of convergence between mainstream parties have prevented potential conflicts from occurring. Under routine periods, the anti-EU claims of peripheral opposition parties have been much less represented in domestic public spheres than is usually recognised. Thus, it could be said that the mobilisation of radical eurosceptic parties seems to be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for conflicts to emerge over EU matters.

In fact, as Hanspeter Kriesi and his colleagues have argued, the contestation of EU integration seems to be part and parcel of the broader cleavage transformation associated with globalisation (Kriesi et al. 2006: 921-956). EU integration contributes to reverse a process of national boundary construction consolidated over the centuries, in the sense that it provides exit possibilities for individuals who had previously been

nationally bound (Bartolini 2005: 116). The progresses of the parties that criticise EU integration illustrate the strengthening of an anti-globalisation discourse in defense of a preference towards “nationals” and in favour of economic protectionism in which the EU dimension is melded, rather than expressing “opposition of principle” to the idea of a united Europe (Kircheimer 1957: 128-156). Radical right-wing parties might have progressed in Europe over the last fifteen years, but they have arguably done so as much through the rejection of immigrants, Islam, and economic globalisation, than on the basis of the mobilisation of the single EU issue (Ivaldi 2004). As Peter Mair puts it, few, if any, parties have been exclusively created on the contestation of the EU issue, that has played the role of “another stick” reinforcing “an already existing armoury” based on a broader nationalist and anti-globalisation discourse (Mair 2000: 27-51).

Third, another effect of the twofold behaviour of opposition parties on the EU has also clearly appeared, to the extent that while mainstream opposition parties have generally maintained their pro-EU stances and tried to depoliticise EU matters, peripheral opposition parties have been more likely to politicise the European cleavage in certain political arenas than in others. Indeed, under certain circumstances, EU referendums have been more prone to politicisation, while in contrast, the saliency of EU issues has remained very low in national election campaigns, and mainstream parties have also actively downplayed their commitments to EU election campaigns. Some national elections have witnessed more EU-related debates than others, while the proximity to EU Treaty ratifications has arguably played an important role in influencing the saliency of EU matters. However, independent of the role played by peripheral opposition parties, what seems to be crucial for a greater politicisation to occur is that mainstream parties also need to be sufficiently divided over EU matters – a condition that has rarely occurred. Yet, in the context of EU referendums, the dominant party of the opposition has generally colluded with incumbent parties on the support towards the Treaty at stake. More than ideological, institutional, or organisational factors, it is the specific party system “situation” that increases the probability of intra-party dissent, while this has engendered recurrent difficulties for parties to sway supporters to their side. Manifesting a pattern of cartelisation on EU issues, this explains why under circumstances of intense mobilisation from peripheral opposition parties, EU referendums have sometimes contributed to awaken the “sleeping giant” that otherwise remains dormant in other contexts.

Conclusion

To conclude, what can it be said regarding the ways national parties have adapted their strategies of competition and behaviour to use, handle, and manage the European issue in domestic political competition? Overall, it can be stated that parties have designed different strategies to adapt to European integration. First, domestic parties have incorporated “European” issues within their political discourses, but it has not necessarily led to a greater “europeanisation” of domestic political debates to the extent that dominant parties share relatively similar positions on European matters. Second, the position of a given party within its party system remains a crucial variable to understand whether it is likely to support a greater politicisation of European matters (while in the opposition or for peripheral parties), or to resist to such politicisation (while in government). Third, it can be said that the likelihood of politicisation occurring has been very dependent on the arena and the context considered: few conflicts over the EU have occurred in national and European elections, but more in EU referendums. That is why, it can be said that few changes have occurred over the last fifteen years regarding the consensual and relatively positive treatment of the EU in national newspapers, the very limited saliency of EU-related debates in national electoral campaigns and the tendency of mainstream parties to converge rather than diverge on the ways they frame the EU. EU issues continue to be treated marginally. Thus, it is the structural absence of conflict that prevails over the development of a rising eurosepticism. Conflicts over EU matters are not typical, nor are they inherently on the increase: they remain the exception rather than the rule. Politicisation has sometimes occurred, but only in specific conjunctures, and in general it has faded away fairly quickly, given that the emergent debates on Europe have been actively condemned and contained by mainstream parties through distinct strategies of confinement. Otherwise, it is the confinement of EU matters to certain spatial arenas and limited temporal circumstances, and the predominance of marginalisation and depoliticisation under routine periods, which prevails. Therefore, there is still a “missing link” in domestic political debates, given that EU institutions and actors generally continue not to be represented, even though in practice they might constitute important factors of change in domestic policy-making.

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